



1001 Connecticut Avenue, NW
Suite 204 • Washington, DC 20036

Tel 202-822-9000
Fax 202-822-5077

MONTHLY LETTER TO FRIENDS
THE CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM
No. 77

FEB-MARCH, 2003

Dear Friends:

While spring is finally (*Finally!*) here, the winter storms seem to have also influenced a blizzard of activity in the very states hit hardest by the strange weather of '03. The last two months have seen a positive trend with parents and community leaders taking action to take back their schools. We've been encouraged and overwhelmed by the activity. It's time to bring you, our friends, up to date.

.....

The Importance of Knowledge, *from the Editor*

Today's education reform efforts can best be described as a struggle between what's good and what's good enough. From attempts to squash charter school laws (see stories on pp. 3-4), to school officials' embrace of mediocre content for kids (covered in NYC shenanigans on page 5), to states scrambling to deal with standards, there is clearly more need than ever before to be clear that there are good and bad programs, and right and wrong approaches to reform. Even the subject of teachers and how best to ensure quality still bumps up against the pedagogical divide that says skills are somehow more important than knowledge.

We begin with some context, courtesy of the Core Knowledge Foundation, an institution saluted for its adherence to principled teachings and rooted in the philosophy that content matters. Founder E.D. Hirsch offers that "reading is more than just knowing the words on the page." A student can have the best reading skills, and schools can spend all the time in the world on "language arts." But fundamentally, success is based on real knowledge. The editor of the CKF newsletter, Charles J. Shields, sums it up this way:

"We are at the tail end of a movement in education that believed self-esteem can be bestowed on children with gold stars stuck to their homework papers, honor rolls, rewards and celebrations. It didn't work as well as predicted. Test scores didn't soar and dropout rates didn't plummet. One reason is that real self-esteem is based on real knowledge, real skills, real achievement. *Children want to earn the right to be proud of themselves.*"

Nowhere will this become more evident than in how we as a nation impart information to students about current international conflicts. Whatever your own sentiments about the situation in Iraq, it's critical that children know the facts behind

the fuss. It is also important that we do not allow them — because of our own passions — to assume that the various sides are simply acting based on emotion and not knowledge.

Recently I was in a classroom where the subject of whether to go to war was being debated among ninth-graders. The teacher tasked them to weigh the pros and cons, which had been assembled on the board, and then to make a determination and be prepared to support their conclusions.

At first glance, and even for hours after, I was quite convinced that this was a valuable exercise at thinking through important current issues. But then I thought about the context in which the students were being asked to explore the issues and I noticed one major omission that would no doubt skew their own conclusions. There was no discussion of (or reference to) historical events throughout history that are relevant to why the U.S. is in this position in 2003. Discussing and assessing conflict requires knowledge of forms of government and why countries adhere to one form over the other. It requires a knowledge of the role of religion in history. Knowing how to assess whether to be for or against war requires a knowledge of our own wars, and where we've fought, struggled, won and why.

Most of us struggle to develop that framework, and work to improve our knowledge base to have that intelligent discussion with a colleague or neighbor. In the absence of that knowledge, are we telling our students that context and history are irrelevant?

That is, in part, what E.D. Hirsch is talking about when he says that “matter matters.” The struggle in education reform is a mirror to our international conflict — we need to choose whether to engage ourselves in battles bigger than ourselves and with interest in community and principle, or rather to be concerned primarily with narrow self-interests. As you take time to explore the rest of this publication, note how many times education reformers seem to do the former.

The Textbook Wars

Speaking of content, Historian Diane Ravitch's new book is setting the textbook world afire, and for good reason. Ravitch analyzed the policies and practices of textbook publishers and provides a serious critique of how the agencies, review panels and policymakers have developed guidelines that embody censorship in books, sanitizing any reference to anyone or thing with differences that may (or have the potential to) offend anyone, regardless of the validity of the offense. It's noteworthy that Ravitch's solutions include getting rid of statewide textbook adoption procedures, which CER has criticized in the past for blocking more and better resources from reaching the schools. The book also suggests that a higher quality teacher corps would help create pressure on publishers to alter their sensitivity procedures, and of course, more information among parents and the general public about the fact that these practices fundamentally alter history for students would help to change policy. [The Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict What Students Learn](#) is published by Alfred A. Knopf.

On Charters

- While charter schools are demonstrating more success with each and every month under their belt, **charter funding is under attack** in state halls nationwide. From Utah to Michigan to Indiana, lawmakers are voicing "concern" that charters may face more cuts than most programs. Charters cost more money, these folks scream. That's not true of course. Failure costs more money. Successful schools should be funded rather than systems. But the states aren't recommending funding cuts in charters because of their "concern." They are recommending cuts out of opposition, but are just not willing to say it that way. The reality is that whenever in history there have been times of fiscal austerity and tough decisions needing to be made, it is *always* education programs in general that traditional education supporters fight to be protected. Interesting that when the budget concerns an education program the traditional supporters did *not* want, how that protection goes out the door...
- Ignorance is bliss... The Mayor of **Salem, Massachusetts** is caught up in the proposal in the Bay State to block the opening of any new charter schools. Seems that Hizzoner, Stanley Usovicz, wanted to block the development of the Salem Academy (which would be only the second charter on the North Shore), rather than allow more children to attend a quality school of choice. He told the legislature this year, "I don't think that the many should be punished to serve a few." Is it a coincidence that this is the place they burned innocent people some 400 years ago? Mass. lawmakers are considering a moratorium on the state's charters, but the Salem charter was approved.
- Education is not the reason for the lack of embrace of the Children's Peace Academy charter in **Eugene, Oregon**. Seems the superintendent there, like the Mayor of Salem, believes that the "negative financial impact" of a new school is too much to bear. The school district issued a report laden with unsubstantiated claims, such as that the Peace Academy conflicts with the intent of the law. In reality, the denial is about fear, not education. What they really should fear, however, is how they plan to educate all of their children without changing the way they currently do business.
- **Washington State** may finally be over the hump on charters. Since 1995 supporters there have persevered in the face of intense opposition by union-backed opponents. Thanks to a change in Senate leadership this past fall, charter supporters triumphed. Sen. Steve Johnson and Rep. Dave Quall are now heads of their respective education committees. By the time you read this, the law will likely have passed both houses and be in the queue for the governor's signature. The law allows universities and school districts to sponsor charters, which would be free of most of the rules and regulations that stifle most public schools. Bravo to the Evergreen State, and especially to long time friends Jim and Fawn Spady, founders of the state's Education Excellence Coalition.
- The third time is not a charm in **Maryland**, where despite Governor Ehrlich's support for a strong charter school bill, legislators with union ties have stymied the momentum of charter proponents. As we went to press, the Governor vowed to veto any bill not up to standard (standards we're happy meet ours!) There's still hope, but then again, the state could be like Washington, where it may take a few more tries to get it right.

- Can it be that **Philadelphia** is finally being recognized for the contribution that charter schools make toward saving the school district money? After years of being blamed for district financial losses, the results are in for the last year indicating that there is actually a small surplus to be applauded, rather than huge black holes in the budget. While there are many reasons — including the district having finally been forced to cut administrative bloat — charter schools are among the reasons for cost savings. With an increase of enrollment to just under 20,000 charter students this year, the school district no longer needs 400 instructional positions in the district-run schools. The cost efficiencies created by charters are finally being recognized, even by the *Philadelphia Inquirer*.

- **Buffalo's** big wave... a huge wave caused by the creation of numerous new learning opportunities for children in this troubled urban district has created an enormous ripple effect on schools and school operations. Come September, parents will have had a choice over a wide variety of public schools, thanks to a new aggressive choice plan implemented by the district leadership. "The plan is a larger effort to compete successfully with charter, parochial and private and suburban schools, and to give parents far greater say in crafting the education of their children," according to the *Buffalo News*. "For our district to succeed, we need to be able to offer parents a menu of educational opportunities for their children," said one district official. Buffalo has had a private scholarship program in effect since 1995, and ten charter schools have been authorized in the region.

- And the Survey Says!...**Arizona** parents are more satisfied with charter schools than parents are with traditional public schools. Among parents with children in charter schools, 67 percent assign their charter schools an A or A+ rating, an increase of three points from a year before. But more importantly, the satisfaction rate eclipses the 38 percent of Arizona's traditional public school parents who gave their schools such grades in May 2000 (the last time the state conducted such a survey). Since school results matter more than how happy a parent is about a school, note that the researchers found a strong correlation between high grades and parental interest in a school's academics. Academics were much more important to grades given to schools than were inputs such as after school programs, technology, or building quality. The survey, conducted for the state board of education by the Human Resources Policy Corporation, concludes that "parents are clearly capable of soundly assessing the quality of a given school," dispelling the oft-heard anti-choice argument that parents aren't able to make informed decisions about where to have their children educated because they aren't "experts."

From the Trenches

Mayor Bloomberg chooses choice later: Vouchers after schools improve? That's what NYC Mayor Bloomberg, one of America's most successful businessmen, had to say during a speech late last year. The irony of this statement is not lost on Wall Street watchers, who have pointed out that Bloomberg did not wait to see if someone else could deliver hot financial news before launching his famous new service. And thanks to Bloomberg, the world of immediate, cable-based on-the-spot news has surpassed the wildest expectations. Think about it.

Information is power: Despite our best efforts, New York is still struggling to inform parents about the options afforded them under the new federal law. That law says that kids in failing schools should be given options. New York city officials complained that they had a hard time reaching parents with this news. So CER solicited its *Weekly Newswire* audience and came up with pages of suggestions for how best to communicate with parents. The suggestions came from media, political, education and many other kinds of subscribers. The advice was posted at www.edreform.com/update/2002/communicationsolutions.htm, mailed to both Chancellor Klein and City Council Education chair Eva Moskowitz, herself a staunch supporter of expanding parent choices. But the district is still having trouble. Maybe if we had asked them to pay for the advice, they would have taken it more seriously. It's not too late!?

It's worth dwelling on NYC a bit longer, because as Ole' Blue Eyes says, If we can make it there we'll make it anywhere... Klein has (to his credit) challenged the principals union by recommending performance-based pay. He has also embraced the creation of additional charter schools and the notion that teachers should be able to be hired without traditional credentials. On curriculum, we're concerned, as are dozens of top-notch university professors and scientists, that reading and math programs selected to be used at failing schools are not the best of what works. It's worth pushing this city hard from the outside to do what it takes to overhaul its overwhelmingly troubled school system, which can be a model for other urban areas. Ok, now for the schmaltz again: "It's up to you New York, New York !"

Choice opportunities for Texan children may be closer to reality thanks to a heavyweight group of legislators from both political parties. As reported last year, the November elections did a lot for states looking to create reforms, despite the opponents' best efforts. One of reform's successes resulted when Texas Rep. Kent Grusendorf became the chair of the House Education Committee. Grusendorf has endorsed school choice for more years than most supporters. Having worked with members across the political divide, he helped put forth a bill with Houston Democrat Ron Wilson, an African-American who since his election in the early 90s has not been afraid to break from many traditional associations. Today the bill would create a pilot voucher program for low-income students in 11 districts that have enrollments of at least 40,000 and a majority of students eligible for free & reduced lunch. The private school would receive about 90 percent of the annual per-pupil cost, and the public school would retain 10 percent. Those students will be tested annually to ensure accountability.

Colorado is inches away from enacting a pilot school choice program that will allow a small percentage of students in any of several districts that have 8 or more schools ranked "low" or "unsatisfactory" to use funds to transfer to another school. The school that receives the new students will receive 85 percent of the per-pupil cost, while the school district retains 15 percent of the cost. In the first year, enrollment is capped at 1 percent of a district's students but by year four the cap rises to 6 percent. This bill is expected to pass out of the Senate committee this week. It enjoys support from a diverse crowd of state leaders, including the Bighorn Center for Public Policy, the Colorado Children's Defense Fund, the Northern Colorado Latino Chamber of Commerce and Ken Salazar, Attorney General and the highest ranking Democratic official in the state.

REALLY?! Poll Finds Some N.J. Parents Feel Unwelcome in Schools... reads a headline in the March 12 *Education Week*. It appears that compared with 20 percent of suburban parents, nearly half of all urban parents surveyed feel unwelcome in their schools. Parents complain of not having meaningful involvement, despite wanting to volunteer. This is no surprise of course; parents whose children for the most part attend schools seriously deficient or outright failing are forced into these circumstances by mandatory assignment and their teachers and staff are less experienced. The solution? Give parents more choices to find places where both they and their children are welcome and will be taught.

A View from the Blob

A reminder that the management is not responsible for any sensitivity you may have in being part of the Blob or being offended by the terminology. For background information about this section and its genesis, consult other MONTHLY LETTERS.

- The Education Intelligence Agency reports that **union membership** overall is down according to the most recent Labor Department statistics. Union members account for a smaller percentage overall of US workers than in previous years, though some states saw increases while others fell short of projections.
- The **decline in Michigan** explains why some affiliates are challenging even the smallest reform effort. After spending millions to elect anti-reform candidates, Michigan's NEA-affiliate is forced to cut staff to deal with a \$10 million shortfall in its \$61 million budget! The staff retirement fund has increased, but an equally big culprit is that membership numbers are not where they were predicted they would be to justify the group's obviously bloated budget.
- No wonder the membership is dropping. NEA president **Reg Weaver's anti-standards diatribe** via paid radio advertising really takes the cake. He says that parents and teachers (and everyone) have been working really, really hard to improve schools and along comes this new federal law to mess up all their hard work. The irony of ironies is that Weaver uses bureaucracy as his justification that the new federal law is bad. He says it creates tons of new requirements and mandates that tell schools how to do everything. Have you ever read a collective bargaining contract?? There is none better than a teacher's union at prescribing how and what teachers should do in a collective bargaining contract. What Reg Weaver is really mad about is not that NCLB issues new mandates, but that they are mandates that the union would rather not have, namely, a mandate for results. So rather than say what's really on his mind, he says we should encourage lawmakers to not impose additional mandates on schools. From here on out, this speech will be called the No New Mandates speech (or NNM for short).
- **A new book** entitled The Worm in the Apple is a stunning and clear expose of all the policy implications of union activity that effect the school, the classroom, the teacher and the child. Oftentimes one will hear a skeptic of reform say, "well, what really matters is what happens in the classroom."

Well, it's true that teaching and learning does happen in the classroom, but only if the teacher has knowledge over her subject and the authority to effect learning. In reality, both are in short supply, thanks to outside influences. Peter Brimelow, author of *Worm*, offers countless examples that demonstrate how the unions, when they do not like a particular policy, will actively work to influence a classroom. Overall, contracts that mandate everything from work hours to work rules affect all teachers, competent or not.

- It doesn't have to be that way, and in fact there are promising changes for teachers and their profession occurring nationwide. For some practical and important, parent-friendly insights into how the teaching profession is being served and new developments to bolster the profession in meaningful ways, check out the latest *Parent Power! Helping you make sense of schooling today*, from the Center for Education Reform's website at <http://www.edreform.com/parentpower/03mar/unions.htm>.
- Alfie Kohn was welcomed with open arms at the Education Minnesota teacher's union conference where he railed **against standardized testing** and argued that rewards and sanctions don't work in the workplace, according to EIA reports. As EIA commentary points out, Mr. Kohn makes tons of money on his speeches, books and tapes, but apparently that has nothing to do with how many he sells or whether he's motivated to do so, right?
- Beware: **A new and Blob-driven poll** suggests that voters simply want more money for education. The annual Public Education Network/*Education Week* poll, engineered as always to pressure policy makers into lavishing ever-increasing amounts of money on public education, did not disappoint its creators. A series of misleading questions like the following conjured answers that gave the illusion voters want more money for public education (over, let's say, accountability and results):

"What if I told you that while the government passed this law, the federal government did not provide **adequate** [pollsters' bolding] funding to the states for the law's requirements? Sometimes, in surveys like this people change their minds. Knowing this, do you favor or oppose the No Child Left Behind Act, or aren't you sure?"

Looking Back

We're pleased to offer you an historical glimpse at the world of reform, a new feature we begin this issue as CER moves to celebrate its 10th Anniversary. From a look at reform through the writings in past MONTHLY LETTERS TO FRIENDS, you'll see there is indeed much to celebrate as well as much to be done in the next decade. So from the **JANUARY 1994 MONTHLY LETTER TO FRIENDS**, here are some excerpts that underscore the saying of an old friend of mine that "*The more things change, the more they remain... things.*" (Misquote intended!)

From the 1994 Line up of Fruitful Choice Efforts

...The battle in Texas to pass a low-income pilot project for school choice is off to a solid start. The Texas Public Policy Foundation (TPPF) gathered an incredible crowd of legislators, media and community leaders who quickly became informed and active solicitors of the state's undertaking. A Texas Coalition for Parental Choice has formed for the grassroots...This, combined with the readily available fire power of the local private scholarship foundation parents and supporters can be used to shore up support for choice through this year in preparation for the vote in 1995. Last year, the same bill lost by a tie vote — with little ground work done....We hope we'll soon hear good things out of the Lone Star State.

Editor's note: check out the Texas story on page 5 which shows that it is possible that just 9 years later, Texas will have it's pilot school choice program!

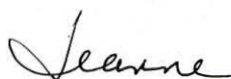
Mark your Calendar! October 29 –30 CER will salute the Best Of...Reform efforts over the past ten years and celebrate its 10th Anniversary. It kicks off with a Gala dinner affair at the Ritz Carlton in Washington, DC and continues with a mini-conference the next day with a veritable who's who of speakers and participants. Information is forthcoming but to inquire early about participation or sponsorship opportunities, email us at 10th@edreform.com.

.....
Clearly there is much to do, particularly as war is here and an ever present reminder that time is precious. To spend our time better engaged, the work of CER has recently taken a new strategic direction and expanded to provide more states and communities assistance in meeting the demands for reform. Those efforts require that we focus most on where we can provide the best value. As we move into our next decade we're officially taking the MONTHLY LETTER down to a bi-monthly. Not less than six times a year (sometimes when you least expect it) you'll continue to receive this world-acclaimed review and look into the wild, wild world of education reform.

This does not mean, however, any less information from CER! In fact, for the last several years, CER has been providing weekly updates to friends and supporters via email. Some of you know about the *CER Newswire*, a weekly snapshot that informs and generates action. With email now standard fare for most of us, this 50-week a year product offers a chance to communicate more frequently.

Please sign up for the *CER Newswire* at www.edreform.com/news so that every week you are ready and well informed. It's free, and it's simple. Make sure to drop us a note while you're there! And a special thanks to our awesome staff for helping to produce this publication, especially Anna Varghese Marcucio and Neal McCluskey.

Happy Spring!


Jeanne Allen